

Issue No. 52 SEPT - OCT 2022

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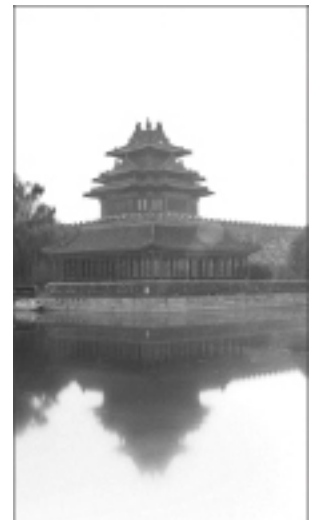


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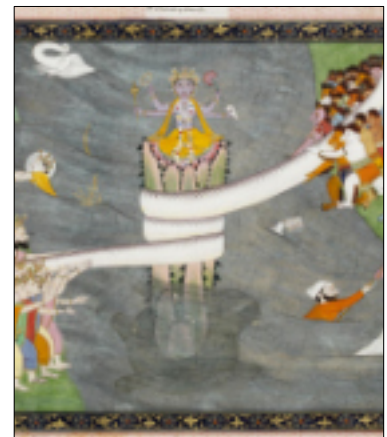
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Editorial

Effective Altruism and Longtermism

In these times of information explosion, it is almost impossible to keep track of what is going on in the world. As a result, there are many good things happening that we have never heard of. And there are also many things gaining momentum that could potentially have a huge impact on all of us without us realizing.

You may or may not have heard of the *Effective Altruism* movement, which started in 2009 and inspires people to give 10% of their income to charity. The movement was started and inspired by several academic philosophers, amongst them the Australian Toby Ord and the 35-year-old Scottish philosopher William MacAskill, and they have been so successful that they control an estimated 46 billion dollars of philanthropic resources.

Last month, MacAskill published a book about *longtermism* which is a core concept of effective altruism. Its central idea is that 'future people matter morally just as much as people alive today' and that 'we can positively affect future people's lives'.

There is no doubt that this young movement has already made a huge difference in the world, and it is very laudable that the people behind it really live up to their ideals and 'walk the talk'. However, and here comes the uncomfortable realization: even good and well-intentioned things can have negative and unwanted consequences in the long term (just think of the side effects of industrialization, technological progress, scientific advances, political movements, etc.), and one of the reasons for this is often a reductionist understanding of nature and the human being.

To give you an example: because Effective Altruism is about maximising the wellbeing of humanity as a whole, it advises that a job in finance is better than becoming a doctor because as a doctor in a poor country you would possibly only save the equivalent of 140 lives in your medical career, whereas by donating intelligently you could save many more - according to their calculations it costs about 4,000 dollars to save a life.

Another outcome of this kind of thinking is that it is worth more saving lives in rich countries than in developing countries because rich countries have

substantially more innovation and are economically more productive and can therefore contribute more to the maximum wellbeing on earth. It also argues that we need more, not less, people on this planet and that focussing on superintelligent machines is more important than saving people from the devastating effects of climate change.

Longtermism also emphasises the importance of developing the potential of human beings. But because of its premises, this then translates into 'transhumanism', which would (seriously!) solve the problem of improving humanity morally by suggesting the consumption of 'morality-boosting' chemicals such as oxytocin and genetically altering ourselves to gain perfect control over our emotions.

This might all sound like some academic thought constructs far removed from reality. However, *Effective Altruism* and its affiliated organisations have within a short time become very influential and Toby Ord, for instance, has advised the WHO, the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, the US National Intelligence Council, the UK Prime Minister's Office, Cabinet Office, and Government Office for Science. Several well-known billionaires have endorsed *longtermism* and *transhumanism* and donated a lot of money. In other words: Thinking translates into actions and ideas like this can very quickly become government policies.

For this reason, *longtermism* has been criticised as the world's most dangerous secular belief system in the world today by former *longtermist* Émile P. Torres, and several other academic philosophers have pointed out its flaws.

At other times in history, ideas would have taken much longer to mature and gradually become tempered by 'the test of time'. But in our times, they can come onto the 'market of ideas' and turn into 'ideologies' before we know it. Especially, as everything 'measurable' has a high market value for governments and business. However, the shadow of measurability is that it reduces everything to numbers.

Everything measurable is only the 'shadow' of what is ultimately immeasurable. And it would be intrinsically wrong to reduce human nature or happiness to arithmetic.

Sabine Leitner

Philosophy for Inner Evolution

The whole of life is a long journey and speed is just an illusion; what matters is not the vehicle we are travelling in, but the path we are following.

Delia Steinberg Guzmán

Evolution, a need for the soul

As philosophers, we can't accept the idea of a static humanity, which progresses materially but changes very little internally. Rather, we see evolution as something necessary and admirable, as a path that will be longer or shorter depending on our desire to walk. Its goals are as high and great as those hidden aspirations of the soul that reveal

themselves in vague and inexpressible intuitions. And the whole idea of evolution is framed within the wonderful and inevitable concept of destiny.

Is the path long or short? It depends on us

With regard to the length of our path, we should rethink the question and realize that the path will be as long as the time it takes us to make the decision to truly evolve and change.

If we play at "being" while continuing to live distracted by everyday life, the path will be long - very long. If, on the other hand, each day becomes a precious time to do something practical for our inner awakening, the distances will become phenomenally shorter. And it may be that, following those small changes that we referred to



above, inner transformations that we had never even dreamed of will begin to occur.

How can philosophy help us?

We study philosophy in order to seek the wisdom we lack, to discover little by little the laws that govern life and therefore ourselves. We study philosophy in order to master our personalities and make them more harmonious, and to offer others the results of our experiences, helping them, if possible, to avoid unnecessary pain. We study philosophy in order to understand the causes behind so many apparent inconsistencies in life, such as pain, disease, poverty, violence, madness, hatred and fear; so that we can recognize, behind these apparent contradictions, practical exercises that life is offering us to work on the evolutionary advancement we are aiming for. We study philosophy in order to take an active approach towards history rather than wasting time in useless complaints; to use the legacies of tradition as a foundation and to generate new ways of transmission towards the future. We study philosophy in order to arouse the sleeping sentiment of human solidarity and to see everyone as a being worthy of our sympathy and understanding; to unveil the mystery of God and to cover our souls with those mysterious veils, so that our souls can return to their native land.

What do we have to gain? What greater gain can there be than what has been outlined above?

To have more or to be better?

Philosophy is about *being* more, rather than wanting to *have* more. After all, there are many people who show that it is possible to have many things, but squander them or lose them in a day. Yet there are not so many who show that they possess the key to their inner being, who have control over their lives and their emotions, compassion for pain, fortitude to face the trials of life and the wisdom to discern who they are, where they come from and where they are going.

Looking for an active philosophy

The unfortunate distortion of ideas and of the words that represent them has meant that philosophy is almost always confused with a passive and meditative attitude, as if it were a

mental formula that is not expected to be reflected in physical action or to influence our feelings.

To be a philosopher is not the same as to study philosophy

What is the point of a philosophy that we don't feel, that we don't love? What is the use of knowledge that doesn't move us, that doesn't cause us to resonate with it? To stimulate our neurons? That's quite limited.

Our neurons need to be stimulated, of course, but so do our hearts. Everything we think needs to be accompanied by strong feelings.

But it doesn't stop there: we need to think, feel and act. And we need to harmonize what we think, what we feel and what we do. When these three elements are in harmony, then we are philosophers, because there is a huge difference between studying philosophy and being a philosopher.

Anyone can study philosophy. We may like it or not like it, understand it or not, but we can always study it. Being a philosopher is something different. It is an attitude, an art. But this is something that anyone can do as well. In fact, it's much easier to be a philosopher than to study philosophy, because anyone who asks sincere questions with a genuine desire to know, and who also sincerely undertakes the search for what will become the answers, is a philosopher. What we want is to be philosophers and not simply to study philosophy.

A philosophy for building

What we propose is a philosophy for a human being who wants to build, for those who want to build their own being. I think this is the greatest honour we could bestow upon ourselves. If we could ask for any decoration or title, we should all ask for the honour of being builders – builders of ourselves and of the societies in which we live, so that we can improve ourselves and the world in which we live.

Philosophy as love and transformation

If philosophy is *love of wisdom*, then that love must give rise to movement. Love cannot stand still, because it is always searching for what it needs, what it longs for.

To be a philosopher requires movement, because it is:

- A love that always asks for more and urges us to go out and get it.
- A constant refreshing of everything we know or think we know. It is to re-read what we have read, to listen again to what we think we have already understood, because every new search will lead us to new treasures.
- A constant renewal of the means we use to achieve the results we are aiming for. We are not always the same, and what yesterday may have been a valid tool, today may be an obstacle on our path.
- A review and transformation of ourselves. Reviewing ourselves is a way of being born every day.
- A natural sympathy for those around us, an understanding of their dreams and needs.
- An understanding that doing things ourselves is a sign of wisdom, but not having anyone to learn from is a mark of ignorance.

The nature of philosophy

Let us imagine a tree. As a plant its life expresses itself in its fundamental nature of wood. Its wooden trunk expands into multiple forms of life, into numerous branches that open up in all directions. The branches, in turn, become laden with leaves, flowers and fruits, with particular forms that will depend on the type of tree it is.

But it would be foolish for us to define the tree according to the number and size of its branches, leaves, flowers or fruits. What is important for us is the form they take and how they are related to the trunk, without which the rest of the tree would not exist.

The philosophical nature is the same. It is the firm trunk of the tree. On its stability and its unchanging nature will depend all its branches and leaves, and the quality of its flowers and fruits.

If our trunk is love of wisdom, the force of love will produce the branches of learning, and from there will come the flowers of knowledge, which will become fruits for humanity.

The philosophical nature has the dual quality of searching and giving, of finding and sharing, of being rich and generous at the same time.

Continuing with this image of the tree, one thing is what we can see and another is the root that is hidden within the earth, which is in fact its most important aspect.



Without roots there is no life and without life there is no philosophy. How can there be love of wisdom if there is no life? Love is essentially something living, it needs roots to nourish it and enable it to survive all the storms and difficulties.

The hidden roots are not trying to escape from the sincere searching of someone who identifies with the philosophical nature. They are just asking for a deeper search, for the causes rather than for the apparent effects.

Extracted from the book *Philosophy for Living* by Delia Steinberg Guzmán, Honorary President of New Acropolis International

Stress, Trauma, Violence

The reasons behind antisocial behaviour

Stabbings have become a frequent crime in London in recent years, especially among teenagers. One of the latest cases happened in a busy park in trendy Islington called Highbury Fields, which is visited mostly by families and locals. In the early evening, in August, dozens of young people, most of them masked, gathered in the park near a children's playground, and a 15-year-old was stabbed and killed. The murderer is not yet known, and nor are the motives for the incident. But this is not an exceptional case. Almost every week a young life is taken by a gun or knife in the capital of the United Kingdom, and it seems that the police are unable to tackle the spread of this pandemic.

In the last year alone, 30 teenagers died in knife crime in London, which is unprecedented. And

many more stabbings occurred in the 20-30 age range too. In 2021, 41,000 incidents involving knives or sharp instruments happened across the country and, apart from the West Midlands, London is the biggest hotspot. It seems the city has turned into a warzone where young people's lives are seriously endangered. There are gangs operating across the city, dealing in drugs, and these gangs are fighting each other to rule their territories. As these gangs are made up of young males, the victims of knife crime are often young males as well. Most of them are born in poor families from where the gangs can easily recruit new soldiers to their groups. It is not surprising that the most affected districts are located in deprived areas, like Newham. Although possessing a firearm or knife in public is



illegal, police often seize weapons from young people, when they do stop and search regularly. Every month about 400 weapons are confiscated. But the numbers are still rising and no one knows when the bloodshed will end.

Digging a bit deeper into the problem it can be seen that the majority of the victims are male, and only a few females have died in the incidents. And most of these males are from black, white, or mixed ethnic groups. Carrying a weapon for these males gives them a feeling of security in a threatening world, as well as respect in their communities, because masculinity and machoism are highly desirable within these groups. Certain types of music and role models in these groups also glamourise gang life and the violent lifestyle. For these young people the home is not a safe space, their parents are often divorced, or they regularly witness domestic abuse. In the streets which become their home they try to set up their own lives, following the patterns they have learned. But the past is filled with stress and trauma. And the problems are not solved, and are rarely tackled by professionals.

Dr. Gabor Mate, a Hungarian-born Canadian psychologist and physician, has written a number of books on how childhood traumas have lifelong impacts on physical and mental health, causing problems like addictions, hyperactivity, ADHD, cancer, autoimmune diseases, or suicide. He strongly believes that there is a connection between mind and body health. He says that children who suffered bullying, marginalization or domestic abuse at a young age suffer lifelong mental injuries and are likely to become sick during adulthood too. Well-developed social policies and help for these groups can save lives. For example, if the parents can be together with their kids and not leave them alone while they are out working every day, this can result in a less stressful childhood and caring family life. Also, youth workers are needed who understand the problems of young people and help them tackle these issues. In London, many youth centres are the only safe spaces for vulnerable children and teenagers, who otherwise go and live the typical gang life.

Solving social issues like gang crime needs complex strategies. In Glasgow, for example, which had a bad reputation for young criminals for many years, they did a lot of work on the problem to try and break down the numbers and give opportunities to young people who had suffered domestic traumas. Police, government and schools worked together to solve the issue, focusing on local communities and providing intervention in schools to help individuals who were at high risk. These young people were given training, education and working opportunities, so they could feel useful and proud of their work and their life. Offenders were supported as well, so that after being released from



prison they did not have to face their problems alone. Also, helping the families which are suffering poverty, social exclusion and single-parenting can prevent the loss of their children. London has made a plan to reduce gang-related crimes and knife crime, which has been funded by the government. Maybe the money will help in the short-term, but the long-term solution would be to sort out the reasons which led to the problem.

Istvan Orban

Inner Alchemy

An introduction to the Great Opus

No doubt many of you, like me, have come across various alchemical images easily accessible on the Internet. Captivating images full of great symbolic value that transmit an air of mystery. With this imaginative power, reverberating throughout the centuries, the alchemists of the past thus succeeded in preserving and transmitting important hermetic¹ teachings.

One of the main problems and obstacles which the modern researcher often faces is precisely the fact that it is almost impossible to penetrate this dense forest of images and symbols. To complicate things, thanks mainly to the *New Age* phenomenon, there has been an explosion of curiosity towards these esoteric themes. This has led to very ambiguous results. In fact, despite their increasing popularity, Alchemy, as well as Astrology, Yoga and Magic have

all become victims of misrepresentation, distortion, confusion and marketing agendas.

What are the major themes found in this alchemical labyrinth? Let's start from the beginning.

As the etymology of the word itself reveals (from the Greek *khēmeia* and the Coptic-Egyptian *khēm*), Western Alchemy has its origins in the philosophical and spiritual traditions of ancient Egypt. These teachings, stretching back thousands of years, have come down to us through the various re-formulations carried out by both the Alexandrian Greek civilisation and the Arabic-Persian cultures.

In spite of those who still claim that alchemy is just proto-chemistry, it is clear that we are glancing into one of the most profound fields of knowledge. One which is concerned with the Human Being and the

1. Pertaining to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus.



cosmos as a whole. This sacred *science* (from the Latin *Scientia* = knowledge) has always made use of two complementary aspects: a material one related to laboratory procedures and an inner one concerned with spiritual development.

Alchemy is a coherent set of interpretations or descriptions of what we call 'Reality' (both visible and invisible). The alchemist's quest is therefore a search for the profound meaning of existence. Through a certain kind of work, the alchemist aims to bring about a gradual but radical transformation (and transmutation) of the human *compound* (both his visible and invisible side) and to reconnect himself to the source of this Reality.

This ambitious programme of spiritual transformation is primarily underpinned by one of the hermetic axioms found in the Emerald Tablet²: "*That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracle of the One Thing*" According to Hermeticism, the universe is supported and guided by a single intelligent principle and energy. This energy-principle then manifests itself in an infinite number of ways.

In addition, the universe is supported and takes form and substance from a single virtual *prima materia* or substance. This implies: 1) that the various planes of existence, from the subtlest (spiritual) to the grossest (physical) must all be interconnected, 2) that they all manifest through the same archetypes and laws.

In a metaphysical sense, the alchemists would say that matter is condensed spirit and spirit is sublimated matter. Therefore, even the limited body and mind (all aspects of the ordinary, mundane personality) can be sublimated and spiritualised. Similarly, the volatile and evanescent human components (those which are linked to our thoughts, dreams and emotions that come and go)

can be fixed in the *body*³ – in tangible works, higher states of being and meaningful actions.

For the alchemist, just as one works on a metal or a plant to extract its essence or higher principle, so one can also work on the psycho-physical compound of the human being. Strictly speaking, there is no distinction between the alchemy of the laboratory and the inner, spiritual alchemy. Aims and methods often coincide. For the alchemist, the word *laboratory* (from the Latin *laborare*, 'to work') has a broad and deep meaning because his work must simultaneously and sympathetically involve



An illustration of the Rebis, the end product of the alchemical *Magnum Opus*.

physical and metaphysical realities. The alchemist's soul and body are simultaneously the object (substance to be worked on) and the subject (the operator who works on the substance) of this *Magnum Opus*⁴. For this reason, alchemy has always maintained an approach to knowledge which is experiential. Theories, precepts and techniques are to be considered true and valid only after they have

2. Also known as Tabula Smaragdina, this text dated to the late antique period and was traditionally attributed to the legendary figure of Hermes Trismegistus.

3. I am giving to the word body a wider meaning closer to its original Latin sense (i.e. corpus).

4. The Great Work.

been put to the test through concrete and tangible activities and their respective results successful or otherwise.

These activities can be carried out in a workshop where herbal remedies are produced or in a garden where vegetables are cultivated. In a blacksmith's workshop to forge metals or in a kitchen to cook food. In a sculptor's workshop, a painter's or a musician's studio to harmonise shapes, colours or sounds. These activities can also be carried out in a gym in order to develop and harmonise the physical body.

These activities can lead to the creation of alchemical compounds, to the holistic care of one's health (by harmonising one's inner conflicts first) or to the refinement and development of mental

attention and perception. They can be used for the improvement of relationships with other human beings or with the surrounding nature. They can be aimed at the realisation of artistic, cultural and social projects that can eventually benefit the future. In short, a whole series of initiatives and works that can give meaning and a non-ephemeral value to our existence.

This is what the alchemists referred to when they spoke of 'the living gold of the philosophers', because they clearly associated a state of spiritual realisation in life with gold – a metal which doesn't tarnish and doesn't alter its quality over time.

'Elixir of immortality', 'philosopher's stone', 'living gold of the philosophers'; these are all expressions which allude to the alchemist's ability to live in a state of perpetual self-regeneration. By integrating the above with the below. By activating his highest potential (his latent spiritual powers). By connecting to his most spiritual part (called *Numen*), he achieves a 'work of wonders', 'the miracle of the one thing'.

During the long history of alchemical practices, this process has been described by using various symbolic models. Some have emphasised the sublimation of the four elements (Earth, Water, Air and Fire) into a *quintessence*, others the gradual transformation of the seven metals-planets, and others still have used the interplay of the three alchemical principles: Sulphur, Mercury and Salt. But this and more can only be the subject of a future article.

Agostino Dominici



The Philosopher's Mercury, illustration from the *Mutus Liber*.

Art and Poetry in the Bardic Ideal

The Bardic Tradition refers to the cultural, judicial, scientific, artistic and religious institutional systems belonging to the Celtic and pre-Celtic peoples of Europe from at least the 7th century BCE. The tradition is first recounted to us by Greek and Roman historians around the 1st century BCE who identified three distinct, yet interrelated groups: the Bards, the Ovates and the Druids. A person could be one or all of these and it is suggested that the Bard was the oldest and foundational level of the tradition, the Ovate an honorary degree and the Druid an officiator and instructor of ceremonies. More precisely the Bard is concerned with the arts, the Ovate with prophecy and divination and the Druid with judicial, philosophical and scientific matters. The tradition all but disappeared with the

Roman Empire, although within the British Isles it managed to survive and underwent a renaissance during the so-called Dark Ages of the 5th century with the great Bardic poets and sages, the most famous of whom was the Welsh Taliesin. The Bardic ideal has continued to inspire and quietly flower under different names in each European renaissance and romantic era ever since and may prove a valuable source of inspiration for our own historical time.

The Bard is the "one who maketh conspicuous", a composer who can traverse the invisible worlds, capture divine inspiration and give it form and expression. Poetically described as 'slaves to the harp', the Bardic ideal is one of service, whose chief concerns in oration and composition are Love,





William Blake's hand painted engraving of his poem "The Voice of the Ancient Bard" in the Songs of Innocence and of Experience

Knowledge and Truth; the 'three divine drops from the cauldron of Ceridwen'. By understanding and giving form to these 'three divine drops or three golden apples' the Bard hoped to 'instruct the young in the art of private thinking', add heroic deeds to the annals of national wisdom and caution against pride, cruelty and other such ills of life. The Bardic ideal is both artistic and educational. Bards could be of any background, ethnicity, race or gender, but went on to occupy a type of elite status in society on account of their dedication to both their art and the communities they served.

Deriving from the 'three divine drops' they developed a system for casting knowledge and wisdom into threes in the form of triads. This is a universal form found in various Eastern and Western traditions but is particularly associated with the Bardic tradition in Britain and Ireland. From the 'poetic triads' we can gain some insight into the requirements for developing poetic genius in the Bardic ideal.

- Three chief essentials of poetic genius: an eye to see Nature, a heart to feel Nature, and a resolute course that dares to follow Nature.
- Three things are indispensable to the making of poetic genius: Understanding, meditation and perseverance.
- Three things condense to improve poetic genius: Proper exertion, frequent exertion, and successful exertion.

- Three pillars of judgement: Bold design, regular practice and frequent mistakes.
- Three faculties of a just imagination: What is possible to be, what ought to be, and that which is beautiful.
- Three things should be well understood in poetry: The Great, the Little, and their connective relationship.

From these few examples we can understand that the art and ideal of the Bard is rooted in a keen observation and connection with Nature, in understanding and meditating upon the examples of nature, its movements and causes. We learn that doing this requires perseverance and exertion, humbly accepting our mistakes and failings without losing a boldness of spirit. Nor is the ideal encouraging the kind of baroque, romantic fantasy often associated with a poetic disposition, rather it is to seek and express a beauty that is united with justice. To make conspicuous the Great, the Little and their connective relationship...

Siobhan Farrar

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Harmony in Ancient Chinese Philosophy

“Equilibrium is the great foundation of the world, and harmony its universal path. When equilibrium and harmony are realized to the highest degree, heaven and earth will attain their proper order and all things will flourish” (The Doctrine of the Mean, para 1).

Ancient Chinese texts tell us about the greater harmony inherent in the life of the Universe. They beautifully describe the constant dance of yin and yang that find harmonious balance, the movement of life in which the multitude of different things find their way and harmonize even as life ceaselessly changes. Thus, harmony appears as a dynamic process which includes different elements and, being a fundamental feature of life, is present as a potential and a condition of true flourishing and growth.

Since it is an essential principle of the Universe, the greater harmony is reflected in numerous lesser harmonies throughout all existence. For instance, it is reflected as beauty and gives rise to music and art. It is reflected as health and informs the science of medicine. It is reflected in human nature as a potential for wholeness and integrity in an individual, and thus calls for inner work of mastering oneself. It is also reflected in society as a potential of harmonious coexistence and calls for individual growth, the ability to manage conflicts and cooperate.

*“Cultivate your virtue.
Always strive to be in harmony
with Heaven's Mandate.
Seek for yourselves the many
blessings.”*

(The Book of Odes, Ode no. 235 "King Wen").



Confucianism elaborated an ideal of a morally refined or cultivated person – Jun Zi – who respects and seeks to understand the Dao, lives in harmony with himself or herself, others and the world. Jun Zi’s self-mastery is a life-long process of developing different virtues, including benevolence, wisdom, righteousness, trustworthiness, propriety, courage, and many more that make possible his or her meaningful and accomplished life.

“Jun Zi harmonizes but does not seek sameness, whereas the petty person seeks sameness but does not harmonize” (The Analects, 13.23). Thus, Jun Zi develops his or her authenticity as well as acceptance and respect for others. Harmony does not presuppose the coming together of the same, it



Portrait of Chuang Tzu.

includes versatility of differences, even conflict and tension that can be transformed into cooperation on a new level through finding common ground, mutually adjusting, accommodating and finally transforming the old vision that had caused a conflict before. Following ancient texts, with the choice of harmony comes renewal: things thrive, people flourish and society prospers.

Another essential element of harmonious co-existence is Li – religious, political and social forms developed and revised through history, and aimed at harmonising people and reflecting the will of Heaven on Earth. Confucius writes “In the practice

of Li, Harmony is the key”. So, a sense of harmony makes forms of Li alive and relevant, ensuring they are not mechanical or obsolete. “Yet there is one respect in which this does not work. To act in harmony simply because one understands what is harmonious, but not to regulate one’s conduct according to Li, indeed, one cannot act in that way” (The Analects 1.12). Hence the necessity of developing both an inner sense of harmony and some mutually recognised and respected forms that enshrine common values.

Harmony is both a process and a goal. Its path for an individual starts with the inner work of realising their nature and leads to harmonious coexistence with others and the world. In words of Daoist philosopher Chuang Tzu: “By cultivating one’s nature one will return to virtue. When virtue is perfect, one will be one with the beginning. Being one with the beginning, one becomes vacuous (receptive to all), and being vacuous, one becomes great. One will then be united with the sound and breath of things. When one is united with the sound and breath of things, one is then united with the universe. This unity is intimate and seems to be stupid and foolish. This is called profound and secret virtue, this is complete harmony.” (Chuang Tzu, The Nature and Reality of Tao).

Nataliya Petlevych

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The Limits to Growth, 50 years on

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of “The Limits to Growth”¹, which was written by a group of scientists from “The Club of Rome” in 1972. The Club of Rome was created in 1968 at the prestigious *Accademia dei Lincei* in Rome, and is composed of scientists from varied nationalities and backgrounds. They had an ambitious undertaking: a Project on the Predicament of Mankind.

The first phase of this project came from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in

Boston (USA) in the form of a model that would represent the interactions and behaviours of what were identified as the five basic factors that determine, and therefore, ultimately limit, growth on this planet: population, agricultural production, natural resources, industrial production, and pollution.

One of the scientists and the leader of the project, Professor Dennis Meadows, emphasised that the model they created, named *World3*, was by definition an over-simplification of the real world, an imperfect mathematical interpretation, and never truly complete. However, the model construction followed the scientific method: it could be traced, explained and most importantly improved. And even though it was not perfect it could still be used

1. The Limits to Growth: co-authored by Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William W. Behrens III (1972). The original publication can be found for free at: <https://www.donellameadows.org/wp-content/userfiles/Limits-to-Growth-digital-scan-version.pdf>

State of the World

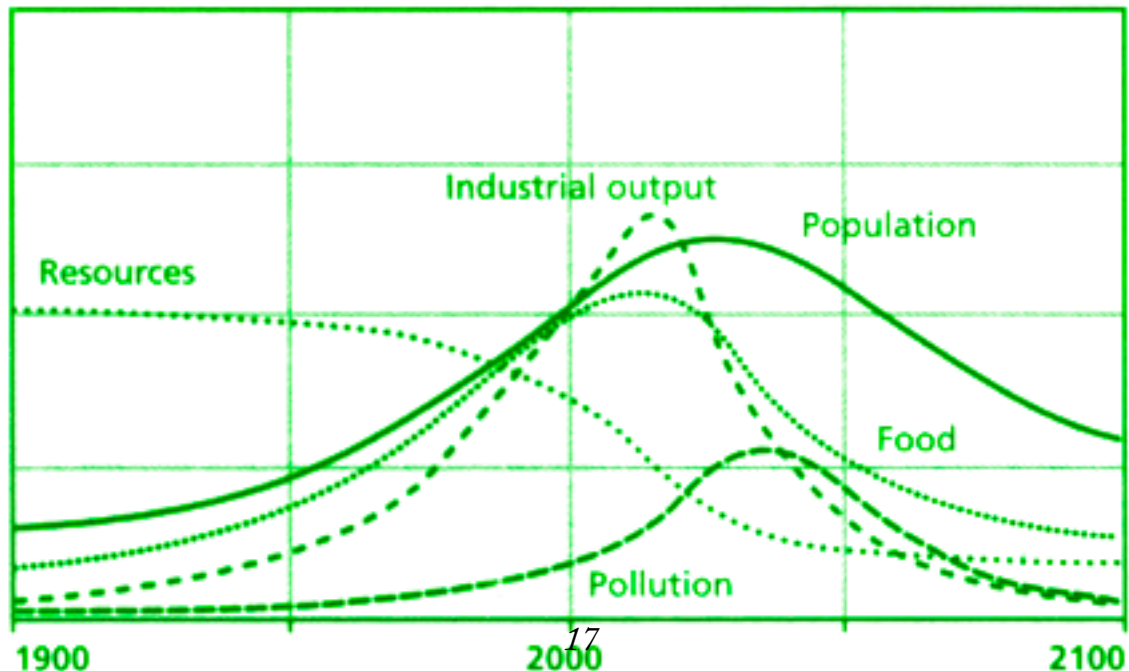




Photo by Guillaume de Germain on Unsplash

as a guide for world leaders to make informed decisions, as the predicament of mankind cannot wait for perfect models to be created. Therefore, it was not meant to predict the future, but rather to give a glimpse of the many possibilities depending on the decisions and actions taken.

There is not enough space in this article to detail or explain the intricacies and findings of the model. What we can say for certain as a conclusion of this paper is that growth is limited, and it is a matter of time until we reach those limits. The positive and negative feedback loops of the five basic factors mentioned above always end up, one way or another, with a form of a dramatic collapse in population and natural resources.

After its publication, the book came under a lot of criticism from mainstream journalists, businessmen and institutions. Which makes sense, as the premises and conclusions of this book rub up against the business-as-usual mentality, the never-ending race for wealth and the myth that science will solve whatever issues mankind throws at it.

Unfortunately for the critics, time was not on their side. In 2002 the same co-authors published the 30-Year Update to the Limits to Growth. The data they were able to collect in those 30 years convincingly demonstrated the accuracy of their model.

But the authors are not all doom and gloom. In doing such simulations they came to a conclusion: what we ought to look for is the State of Equilibrium, where dramatic collapse is avoided, and a dramatic change in our actions is needed. Today we call it 'sustainability'. As the 1987 World Commission on Environment and Development defines it: a sustainable society is one that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". In order to achieve this feat one must control, i.e. limit, more than one of the five factors.

Such drastic actions call for great efforts and meaningful changes in our consciousness on how we value others and our environment. In that regard, they propose two indexes of measurements: Human Welfare and Ecological Footprint. A sustainable society would be looking for qualitative development rather than physical expansion, and therefore, would not reject the concept of growth, but rather redefine its meaning and where it should be applied. Such a society would look at distribution patterns and change accordingly, as it looks to the two indexes to improve itself and grow from within.

Florimond Krins

Churning of the Milky Ocean

According to the Hindu scriptures *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, *Vishnu Purana* and *Mahabharata*, King Indra and his clan of demi-gods, called devas, lost their power and immortality due to a curse by the sage Durvasa. This brought upon them a great struggle in battle with demons, called asuras. In their state of despair, they went to consult Vishnu, a major deity. He advised them to win back their immortality, but in order to do so they first had to make peace with the asuras and join forces with

them in the tremendous task of churning the milky ocean.

Indra went to the asuras with the proposal and they all agreed. To churn the ocean, they used Mount Mandara as a churning rod, around which they tied the snake-king Vasuki as the churning rope. They all pulled together, the mountain was spinning, the ocean was churning, but nothing emerged. They pulled harder and harder, but to their dismay Mandara started to sink. At that moment

Vishnu discreetly jumped into the cosmic waters in the form of Kurma Avatar, a giant tortoise, and held the sinking mountain on his back.

The work continued when suddenly a dark poison called Halahala started to appear, threatening all existence. Panic spread and again help was needed. The gods approached Shiva, who came to their rescue and drank the poison.

The churning continued until the first gifts started to appear, which



the Devas and asuras distributed among themselves. During the churning, the goddess Lakshmi also emerged and united with Vishnu, until finally, the physician Dhanvantri appeared with a pot of amrit, a potion of immortality. But as soon as Dhanvantri came out, the asuras grabbed the amrit and left the devas empty-handed.

Again, Vishnu intervened in the form of the seductive Mohini Devi and completely enchanted the asuras. While the asuras were all immobilised by the charms of



Vishnu cuts the head of the immortal asura Svarbhanu.

beauty, the devas received the potion of immortality. When the asuras realised they had been deceived, it was already too late, as the devas with their power easily won any battle to come.

In one key, this story speaks of a spiritual journey and the development of our mind. To start our journey, we have to make peace within ourselves and accept our shadow side. Fighting

our negativity will not make it disappear.

The snake Vasuki as a churning cord represents the attention of our mind, at one time it is elevated, while in the next moment it can be drowning in negativity. Eventually we realise that both conditions are part of the same coin, and that there is a state above it, which is not swayed by either positive or negative.

On the spiritual path there will be many doubts, as we don't see the goal clearly yet. Our Mandara can start to sink as we forget who we truly are. When we hit the very bottom, the divine intervenes, like a *deus ex machina*.

Before we can reach the goal there are more tests to come: Halahala, the poison which emerges from the ocean of our mind. We have dedicated so much of our time to the work, but there are no results and then we lose our faith. Our will and sincerity are being tested: do we really want it, or are we going to run away and abandon our spiritual path when it gets tough and we don't receive what we want? If we are not sincere in our seeking, purification will have to happen. In the story, the poison of the mind is removed by the grace of Shiva and the work can continue. This is when we become spiritually reborn.

When we continue, the gifts of churning start to emerge, gifts which are of a wonderful nature as a result of spiritual development.



Bronze statue of the god Shiva.

They are siddhis, certain powers, which for a true seeker should not act as a distraction, as this is not the final goal. Alongside the gifts and before the amrit itself, Lakshmi Devi emerges, a goddess associated with wealth and prosperity, but also devotion, as she is the one who grants divine vision. Without devotion the process can't be completed, it is the element in the alchemical process that brings the transformation. The soul needs to yearn.

When, finally, Dhanvantri emerges with the amrit, our mind is still not ready, and despite all the transformation along the way, immortality is still not within our reach. Only by divine intervention and by completely purifying all the negative aspects within oneself can the goal finally be attained. The mind transcends duality and finds its place where it has always been, in the immortal realm of bliss.

Miha Kosir



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